

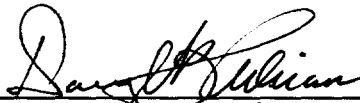
The Honors Humanities Series and the London Centre:
Ideas, Thoughts, Reflections, and
Their Impact on my Philosophy of Life

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language defines philosophy as "the general principles, laws or causes that furnish the rational explanation of anything; the rationale by which the facts of any region of knowledge are explained." More specifically, I would consider philosophy as comprising the values, attitudes, morals, and beliefs of a person that influence and guide his actions in life. In Krapp's Last Tape, Samuel Beckett suggests a popular existentialist view that a man is the sum total of the acts that make up his life. This theme extends from the "existence before essence" idea. Every man has a unique experience in life proving that he "lives" or has existence rather than he just "is", has being or essence. Therefore, in describing my personal philosophy and how it has been affected by my participation in the Humanities series and the London Centre program, I will center specifically on my personal attitudes in three general areas. I will first examine my attitude toward others. Second, I will look at how I view religion and my existence. Finally, I will look at my attitude toward myself. As I believe the idea that man is largely a product of his environment, I hope to support that by relating my beliefs in the aforementioned areas to the environment surrounding me in my life.

In the beginning...

January 28, 1990

Dear Mom,

Our plane touched down at Gatwick Airport today at 9:00 AM London time. After getting settled at Regent's College a few new friends and I got lost in the city for the better part of the day. I've already noticed many differences between here and home. For instance, being Sunday, the three of us had a terrible time trying to find an open restaurant or place to eat. Most stores are closed on Sunday, or so it seems. Another difference is that I almost get plowed over by angry motorists every time I cross the street. Written on the streets by crosswalks are the large letters "look right" to remind tourists such as myself that cars drive on the left side of the road and therefore will be approaching from the right.

Subtle differences or mannerisms in daily life in London have already begun to hit me as well as the earlier mentioned life threatening dissimilarities. For example, in the tube (subway) stations, it's commonplace to observe a few simple rules of etiquette. When riding the escalator, stand on the right. The left part of the steps is the passing lane. Do not speak while on the trains, simply stand or sit with your head down and mind your own business. Observations of social rules like those have been accompanied by a realization that many social norms observed in the United States are more relaxed here. Namely the drinking age. I met a British student tonight in the campus pub.

He was my age and claimed he'd been drinking regularly (every day) since age 11. Rarely does one here drink to get drunk though. There's a strong desire among British drinkers to always remain in control. Smoking also runs rampant in England. Whereas the health kick has cut back the number of smokers in the U. S., I'd say probably seven or eight out of ten people over here smoke cigarettes.

My personal observations and comparisons of the many social norms existent in England with those back home has led me to recall the establishment of the society-instilled values that help to make up my philosophy of life. I remember during the earliest years of my life, learning lessons from you and Dad that would shape my behavior. In the beginning those lessons were achieved through imitation. I mimicked those around me in learning to crawl and then walk and it was good. I later began to recognize people and upon learning speech, addressed them properly and it was very good. At this stage in my life I was able to understand verbal commands from you and Dad. Being highly impressionable, the activities that you either endorsed or prohibited shaped the foundation of my morals and values. I realized that I would be praised or rewarded for sharing, giving a hug or performing a desired task such as finishing my dinner. On the same note, actions like hitting, biting and throwing things were met with disapproval. Fundamental values such as being nice to others and obeying ones parents began to take root within me. As I grew older, these values developed and new

lessons provided more, newer morals. Watching "Sesame Street" and engaging in similar learning activities were encouraged and activities such as "fibbing" or putting candy from the supermarket into my pocket without asking were discouraged. Cleanliness and orderly behavior were initiated as it became increasingly more common to find cleaning my room a prerequisite to playing outside. As I entered school, the "Sesame Street" morals were reiterated as good performance and "doing my best" in school were highly commended.

As I grew even older, the negative stigma on unhealthy or illegal activities such as smoking or drinking became apparent to me. Conversely, kids in England at this age and even earlier, never observed negative attitudes surrounding these activities. Hence drinking and smoking are more common in the U. K. Drinking as I mentioned before, is different. In the U. K., it is common for people to drink with meals or for leisure, but very seldom to get drunk. In the U. S., drinking is prohibited for minors. Consequently, rebellious teenagers drink to "buck the system". Popularity is achieved as greater amounts of alcohol are consumed. The differing regulations and attitudes held of these activities have changed the way in which they occur in these countries.

Thus from the time of my birth, I began to be taught the "right and wrong" types of behavior by you, Dad and other influential adults. The determination of an activity's being "right" or "wrong", was often largely dependant on society's

perception of that activity. Hence in learning what behavior was acceptable to society, I was incorporating the values and attitudes of society into my personal philosophy. Throughout my entire life, the decisions I make will still continuously be affected by those founding values. In the poem Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, Robert Fulghum sums up this idea perfectly. "Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain but there in the sandbox at nursery school." While receiving a foundation for my philosophical stance from what I learned in my early life, I have been able to achieve individualism by the way I incorporate these values during my personal life experiences

Sorry Mom, I guess I really got off on a tangent there. The total culture shock since arriving here though has forced me to ponder my values in life and how they've been affected by the way I grew up. I've become convinced that people are indeed a product of their environment. From birth the influences of the people and situations surrounding us determine our perceptions of the events that make up our life. However, the extent of influence and the degree of correlation between environment and the attitudes of the person within it vary. An example might be a child who is raised in a poor household in the big city projects. While one child may resort to stealing and crime to support himself as may be common in his surroundings, another may

pledge himself to obtaining a better life for himself and his future family after witnessing the unfortunate condition of his upbringing. Both children were influenced by their environments, only in different ways. Thus I see a person's philosophy not only as being the ingesting of the values suggested by his environment, but also as the way those values are interpreted and determine the course of his behavior.

I guess being new to England and feeling a little lonely and out-of-place, has warranted this extraordinarily long letter. I promise not to babble so much in the next one. I hope everything is going well back home. Give my best to everyone.

Love,

Derek

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." Thomas Jefferson Declaration of Independence.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself" Jesus Second Great Commandment Matthew 22:39.

January 30, 1990

Dear Mom,

Well, we've been here about three days now and I'm starting to settle in. Our first week has been all orientation, no classes. My promise to myself to get an early start on my English 203 independent study course has already been broken. I have a gut feeling that I'll still be finishing the course in the few weeks preceding graduation next year.

Instead of working on English, my new friends and I have used the time to its fullest to explore all of the major sights of London. My favorite landmark thus far has been Trafalger Square. It's such an accurate depiction of life in London. The four large lions symbolize England as the eagle symbolizes the United States. An interesting bit of trivia about the lions that we learned in a tour is that they lie with their paws out in front of them, a parallel distance apart from one another. Cats however, customarily lie with their paws criss-crossed on top of one another. The disparity stems from the fact that the sculptor had never seen a lion's paws before. He therefore modeled the forelimbs of his lions after his dog's paws! People gather in Trafalger by the thousands though to visit the surrounding embassies, the National Gallery, or to just sit and feed the pigeons. Trafalger is further the hub of popular political

demonstration. Anytime a protest or march of any sort occurs, it usually originates in Trafalger. Currently, outside the South African embassy on one side of the square, a demonstration is continuing that began the day Nelson Mandella was imprisoned. There have been a number of demonstrations against the newly instituted, highly controversial and unpopular poll tax. From what I've learned, they've all taken place in Trafalger. Standing in the Square, more than any other place, truly makes me realize that I'm in London.

Another favorite spot of mine that I've visited has been Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park. At this location, there are set up a number of step stools and soap boxes so that anyone who desires to can stand up and speak his or her mind about anything. The topics are varied but usually include religion, politics and current events. In the event that no volunteers exist, there are a number of controversial "regulars" always on hand to eagerly spew forth their philosophies. Usually there are a number of hecklers in the audience as will. The normal result is a shouting match between speakers on different soap boxes with one another and their respective hecklers. In Battle Royal by Ralph Ellison, the main character gives a speech about social equality at the end of the story. The hostile audience to which the speech is delivered is much like the crowd surrounding the National Socialist Party's soap box at Speaker's Corner. Unlike the story though, the Socialists aren't physically threatened or put under duress to keep their words toned down to a popular

viewpoint. The freedom of speech is more respected in this forum.

I think the reason that I like these two places so much is the principle behind their existence. Trafalger, as I already mentioned, while being a symbol of England is a center for political expression and the sight of corresponding protest. Inequalities or discrimination among people frequently are the underlying reason for protest in Trafalger. Further, these topics are often the subject of speeches at Speaker's Corner. I have a fundamental belief regarding the treatment of others, being that all people are equal regardless of race, age, sex, religion or other such disparities. These two particular places serve as vehicles to support this belief as they are open to anyone for the support or causes of all people.

I know that my perception of other people was a portion of my philosophy that was highly shaped by you and Dad. Your belief in the equality of all people was an often repeated lesson in my childhood. Having an adopted black sister has led me to become more sensitive to racial discrimination. It has also proved to me beyond a doubt that people are the same given equal opportunities. The stereotypes often attributed to a race, religious group or ethnicity are the result of being raised in that circumstance, not being born of that state.

The idea of treating all men equally can also be evidenced from my early lessons in church. In the parable of "The Good Samaritan", Jesus praised the Samaritan who stopped to help an

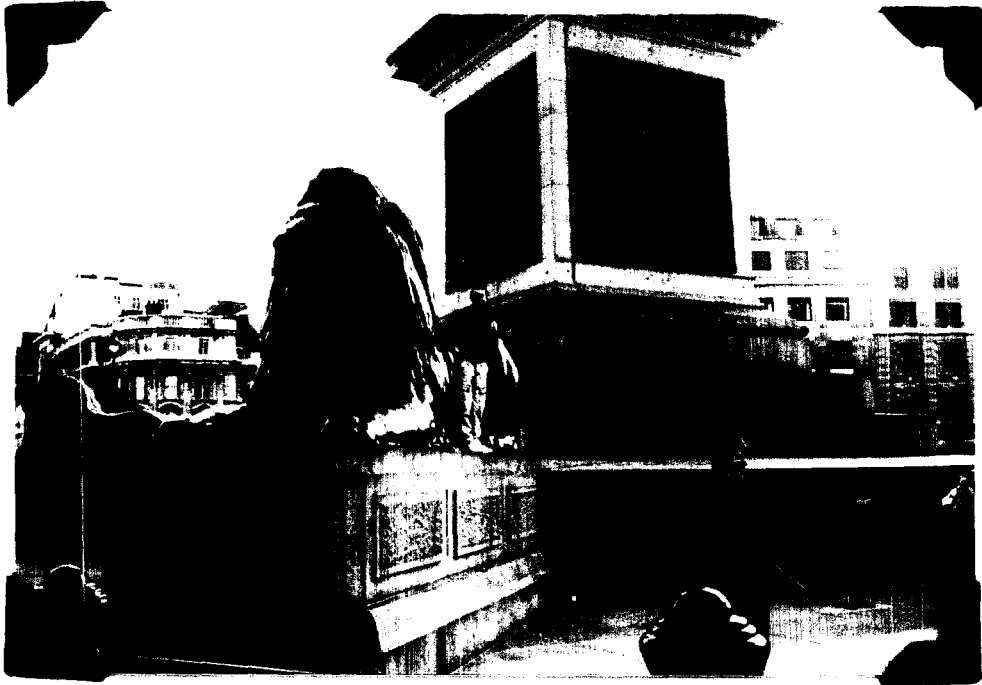
injured traveller on the roadside. The traveller's home country was the sworn enemy of the Samaritan's, however he was seen by this particular Samaritan as not a man of an opposing nationality, but simply as an injured man in need of help and was thereby attended to. Jesus, in the telling of the story holds the Samaritan as an example for all men to strive to emulate.

In one of our first nights out on the town in London, I met an American serviceman at a bar in Picadilly Circus. He was stationed in Germany but was in London for two weeks to take a class for his specialty area in the army. We got into a long conversation about American visitors abroad and their often ethnocentric attitudes. As I experience the different cultures over here, I am more convinced of the corresponding differences between people of all nations and the inherent good traits within each culture. We talked well into the morning about how Americans need to become more culturally learned. Foreign language should be a required subject in school. Most foreigners learn to speak English, but so few Americans make an equal effort to learn another country's native language. Foreign study and travel should be made more available. The key to treating all people equally is the understanding of people's cultures. Hopefully some day, relations between people of all origins will be good. I know that during my tour of England and Europe, I will not be handicapped in my absorption of foreign culture due to a constant comparison and downgrading of activities that are "un-American".

Anyway, so much for the first few days. I'll probably continue sightseeing in London the rest of this week before classes start next Monday. I'm enclosing some pictures of Trafalger that I've already had developed. One of them shows the demonstration going on outside the South African Embassy. I'll write soon and tell you more about what I've seen. Give everyone my best.

Love,

Derek



February 1, 1990

Dear Mom,

We had a really great day touring London today. The highlight was a visit to St. Paul's Cathedral, the second largest church in the world. The only building larger is St. Peter's at the Vatican in Rome (which I'll see on our European tour after the semester ends). The inside is absolutely beautiful. You'd particularly love it with your fondness for stained glass. The decor that stood out the most to me though was the numerous memoriums to the Allied soldiers who gave their lives in the World Wars. The only question I had concerned the cathedral's name. I had previously thought that only Catholic churches were named after saints. St. Paul's however, is not a Catholic church but rather is open to all faiths.

The visit and subsequent thoughts of Catholicism led me to do some serious thinking about my faith later in the day while on a cold walk through Regent's Park. I've come to a definite conclusion: at the age of 17, I was too young yet to be confirmed. The many questions I still have regarding our faith and my corresponding lack of knowledge about Catholicism has led me to believe that I was too young and uninformed to take the formal vows of becoming an adult Catholic. As you know, since being confirmed myself, I've served as a Confirmation sponsor for two people and helped Father Mike during the weekly Confirmation classes. Those experiences lead me to the same conclusions. At the high school age, most kids are still attending church, and

Confirmation, to keep their mothers happy (I was!). In the administration of this sacrament, too much time was spent studying the Catholic rulebook and not enough time was devoted to explaining why we as Catholics believe as we do as compared to members of other faiths.

So while walking through the park, engaging in this train of thought, I deciphered what it is that I do and don't believe. Later, I'll compare those ideas with those proposed by the Catholic religion and see how I fare. First and foremost, I decided that I do believe in God. This conclusion was no easy one to come by after many interesting debates with atheistic or agnostic friends on the subject. Some very vital points are raised. The most difficult to refute is the logical train of thought that people are afraid of death and therefore believe in God and hence an afterlife to stifle that fear. Many people when looking at the Ancient Greeks and their seemingly ridiculous beliefs and religious customs point to this argument. The Ancient Greeks used religion to explain the facts of life that were a mystery to them. The Greek myths explained why men couldn't fly, why Spring followed Winter and what happens to men when they die. In Homer's The Odyssey, Odysseus attributed the storms that weathered his ship as being sent by Poseidon the sea god. Rather than being an affect of nature, the storms were explained as the god's response to the hero's blinding and fooling of his son the Cyclops. Today, modern science explains many of life's mysteries, except what happens to people after

death. Therefore there are still stories of a divine entity to explain this phenomenon.

Another parallel can be drawn between today's faiths and their customs and those of the Ancient Greeks. Interestingly enough, the strongest example involves the Catholic Church. Specifically what I'm referring to is the Catholic's high reverence for holy officials, such as the Pope, the hierarchy of those officials, and the subsequent need for those officials to be dressed in sacred clothing while performing sacred, traditional blessings and acts. If it's mythology and fool's worship for the Ancient Greeks, why is it truth to the Catholics and other modern religions?

Upon considering my own faith though, I realized that the pomp and circumstance of today's religion is not essential to my beliefs. The foundation for my belief in God is a feeling that the human creation is too fantastic and too far superior to other forms of life not to be meant for a possible higher purpose. Being the only creatures able to effectively reason, think logically, and therefore be held accountable for our actions, there must be a higher authority to be held accountable to. Therefore the essence of my religious belief is not derived from a fear of there being nothing after death but rather an existentialist view that human life would be "absurd" or meaningless if there wasn't a higher purpose.

My general feelings are then pointed in the direction of Catholicism by the teachings of the New Testament. Holding the

Old Testament as nothing more than fiction equivalent to the Greek myths, I can look to the actual historical recordings in the second book of The Bible to provide direction for my beliefs. In the New Testament, the life of Jesus is told in four separate accounts by four different witnesses to His life. The nature of these accounts and the subsequent narrative of Jesus' life are too terrific for me to discount the fact that He was indeed the son of God. His reason for living was to provide direction for human life. Why He provided this direction when He did and what the people who lived before Jesus did, I don't know. Dante theorized that those people living before Jesus or those failing to be baptized or failing to make the choice to believe in God are spending eternal after-life in the first Circle of Upper Hell. There, they continuously run after banners while they are repeatedly stung by insects. Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan are among the prominent non-Christian thinkers doomed to this fate. While choosing not to speculate as Dante has, I simply realize that as a result of His life, modern religions have been formed. They have further been distinguished from one another by the way they view His existence.

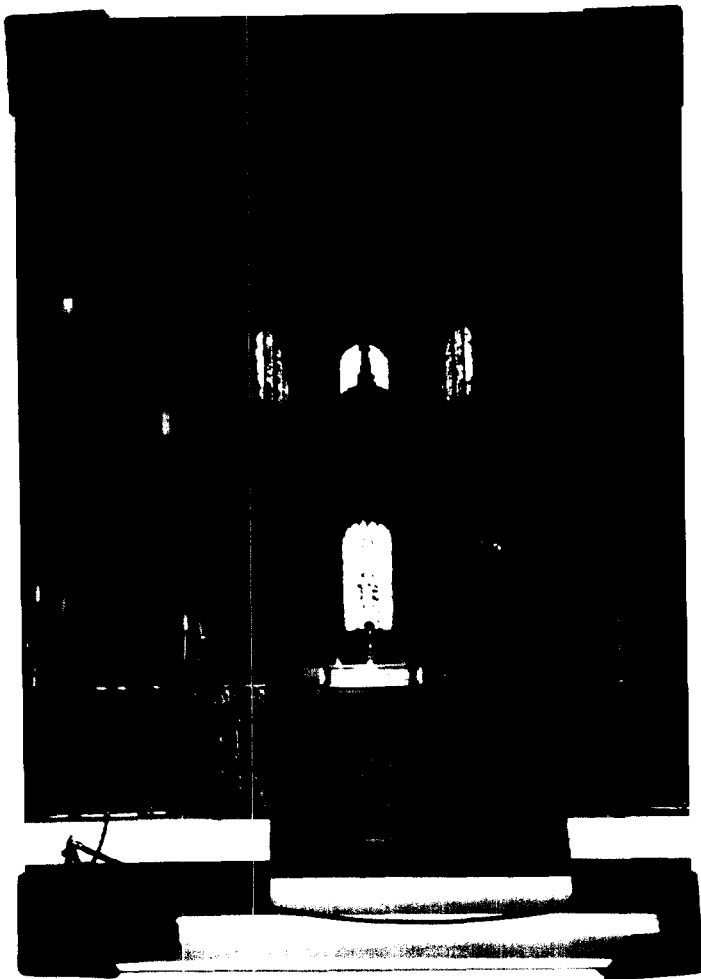
In summary Mom, I have found that a majority of my values do match those proscribed by the Catholic Church. This correlation is probably due to your and Dad's Catholic background and influence on me during my upbringing. Nonetheless, the corroboration is there. Many of my values are not as conservative in nature as the laws of the church but by the same

token, I'd doubt if there exists anyone whose faith demonstrates pure Catholicism. Each person should have an individual religious philosophy based on environment and personal experiences. It is for this reason that I respect the beliefs of all religious faiths. This value ties back in with my belief of all men being equal.

The pictures enclosed are of St. Paul's. I hope you can sort of appreciate its beauty from just the photos. Well anyway, have a great day Mom, say hi to everyone for me, and I'll write back soon.

Love,

Derek



February 3, 1990

Dear Mom,

It's hard to believe I've been in London an entire week! Today is the seventh day since our plane touched down. Today, I rested. We've been running around like madmen all week trying to take as much of the city in as possible before classes begin next week. I needed a day to relax and reflect upon it all. Upon doing so, I've realized a couple of things about myself.

Remember how you're always telling me I should be more tolerant of others? How I shouldn't let my perfectionism cause me to demand too much and be disappointed too often? I've learned a pretty good lesson as far as that idea goes in my first week here. Being new to this country and its customs, I've made quite a few mistakes, social faux pas if you will. I've also been lost numerous times throughout the city. In short, I've been a "stupid tourist". I'm sure that as time goes by, I'll learn the ways of English life and not be such a social nuisance, but until then... The point I want to make though is that the English people thus far have been extremely understanding of my miscues and overly anxious to lend a hand. Their tolerance of my "American" behavior while in their country has been tremendous. As a result I've already started to learn some of the customs and am able to fit in a little better each day as compared to the newly arriving tourists. I wonder if foreigners visiting the United States find American's to be as hospitable and understanding as they attempt to learn our culture and act

accordingly. My last remembrance of being in New York City and witnessing the average New Yorker's tolerance for any imperfections that hampered his daily routine leads me to think not.

Back to my original point though, while observing the extreme tolerance and patience the English have shown me, I've realized the often lack of tolerance and patience I often have with others who may be not perform up to my standards or expectations. By realizing this flaw in my character, I think I can change it to become more open to different ideas and behavior and lose my "New York" mentality.

The other realization I've come to has been about one of my good characteristics. I owe my high degree of self confidence to you and Dad. Both of you, especially Dad, have been strong believers in maintaining self confidence in order to achieve one's fullest potential. I still remember Dad's part-time business of selling motivational cassettes designed to teach goal setting and the achievement of those goals through positive thinking and self confidence. How does this pertain to London you ask? I'll tell you.

You may not have noticed but I was pretty nervous after you let me off at the Indianapolis Airport. I knew absolutely no one that I was leaving with. A number of years ago, I probably would have never left my circle of established friends to travel with 30 strangers for four months. Heck, I remember wanting to transfer school districts when I went to high school because my

best friends were going to Muncie Northside and I was destined for Central. But you and Dad objected and of course I made new friends at Central and had a great four years. Well in the seven days I've been here in London, I've already met a lot of new friends and am beginning to feel quite at home. I think I learned to have confidence in myself at an early age and as a result am able to participate in things like this. That confidence also carries over to other things like sports, school, and work. As a result, I think I am better able to utilize my individual abilities.

It's been a great first week Mom, I'm looking forward to starting classes Monday and continuing to explore London and hopefully negotiate some time for more extensive travel. I'll keep you informed of those plans. I still haven't had time for English 203 yet though. Here are just a few more pictures of London. You should recognize these quite easily. Please give my best to everyone and don't forget to pay my VISA bill.

Love,

Derek



May 2, 1990

Dear Mom,

This will probably be the last letter you'll get from me before I return home. Tonight we spend our last night in Paris and thus bring a close to our continental tour of Europe. Tomorrow we'll head back to London. After spending a few days in Ireland, I'll hop on the plane and head home, arriving in Indy on the ninth of June.

The tour has been fantastic. Many of the feelings and attitudes I expressed to you in letters after I first arrived in England have been supported by experiences on the continent. For instance, visiting the magnificent Basilicas in Rome and witnessing their grandeur further makes me examine my faith as one that reaches beyond the splendor and is based on a basic belief in God and the purpose of my existence. I can appreciate the beauty of the churches or religious icons, but can separate them from the essence of my faith.

Also, remember when I questioned how well a foreigner might be received in New York City? By encountering language barriers in every country on the tour, I have become more of a foreigner to my surroundings than ever before. Yet the continued tolerance for my ignorance has been incredible. It reminds me and reinforces my desire to become a more open-minded and accepting person myself.

Mom, I feel much like the title character in Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther as I have expressed my feelings and

— confessions to you in such detail through my correspondence while in London. But writing about my experiences and the thoughts they have provoked has helped me to better see the results of this semester on my philosophy of life. Don't forget to meet me at the airport at 8:00 PM your time. I'll look forward to seeing you all soon.

Love,

Derek